BOOK REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Buller, L. Jeffrey, Academic Leadership in the New Normal, pp 255, Atlas Leadership Publishing, USA, 2021, ISBN 97987249111221, Rs 2560.

This book is an important contribution that documents the changes that are urgently needed in academic leadership in higher education institutions because of the Covid 19 pandemic the world over. The first chapter provides a background to the readers about the way the pandemic has changed the academic landscape of universities and colleges. The major change being a shift from the face to face mode of teaching to either the blended mode or completely online mode depending on the ever dynamic situation in which institutions were placed. This overnight, forced change introduced both the faculty and students to flexibility and provided them with an opportunity to reinvent themselves on one hand and balance work and home more effectively on the other hand keeping the time and space constraints in mind. Many universities truncated their semester duration in order to make up for the time lost due to imposition of lockdowns. The author raises an important question that is: If a truncated semester was found to be enough to transact the curriculum effectively and assess students then why do we need extended duration in the first place? This is also the time to ponder upon the role of university professors and of universities as a whole. Looking at the inequities imposed by the pandemic across different socio-economic groups it is imperative to revisit the perceived role and functions of universities.

Universities are now under tremendous pressure that their pass-outs must be able to fetch a decent job. The emphasis on knowledge, values, attitudes or wisdom that higher education classrooms are entrusted to develop is no more a priority. The next chapter delves into scenario planning. The higher education setting is impacted by a number of forces such as societal changes, technological advances, organizational changes, ethical concerns etc that need to be factored in with respect to any future planning. Two crucial goalposts in higher education that warrant the attention of academic leaders are: Indulging in appreciative inquiry and Preferring systems over goals. Appreciative inquiry basically stands for reflecting upon what a system does best in terms of performance parameters and then repetition of these best practices. Preferring a system over goals means having a strong system in place such that achievement of goals will not be a concern any more. Chapter three makes a plea about data not being the sole yardstick with respect to judgment in terms of future predictions or trend analysis with respect to growth of an institution. It is noteworthy to understand that data analysis done statistically can be interpreted in a number of ways and the interpretation that is advantageous always finds a way to be retained. Higher Education institutions may be data informed with respect to looking at the past or present but predicting the future based on data is a fallacy in which academic leaders should not live. There are a number of factors that need to be factored in while looking at the outcomes of higher education such as the degree of academic and personal enrichment experienced by pass outs as well as the happiness they experienced while pursuing the courses. These outcomes are difficult to measure in terms of numerical data looking at the subjectivity attached. It will be unfair to measure the success of a higher education institution only on the parameters that are quantifiable such as the number of students who have been placed or the number of students who have passed out with higher grades. Therefore over dependence on data alone for future planning is something that needs to be discouraged. The next chapter focuses on the essential conditions needed to usher in the fifth industrial revolution. In higher education institutions the essential drivers of change will be introduction of flexibility in all domains such as staffing, curricula planning and transaction, accreditation parameters, mode of content delivery etc. Universities will have to revisit the modalities of appointment with respect to tenured positions, temporary positions etc such that they are saved from any financial burden or bankruptcy in near future. The courses offered to students will have to be need based depending upon the length and depth the different cohort of students aim for in terms of knowledge and skill sets. This chapter also reinforces the change introduced by the global pandemic in terms of distance learning being an alternative to face to face education. Blended learning has emerged as the future of higher education all across the world and learning preferences of students will need to be respected. In terms of accreditation the focus will have to shift to tangible outcomes in terms of mastery level learning attained by students rather than just passing a number of courses. Chapter five goes further in giving examples of the usefulness of flexibility and resilience in times of crisis. It is always better to have contingency plans in place in case plan A fails due to any reason. Operational planning comes in handy wherein you plan in advance about the changes you need to introduce as an academic leader to achieve the goals through an alternate route. Plans may fail owing to the expertise of human resource or the change in circumstances on ground. As an academic leader it is important to lead an organization with a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset. A growth mindset entails believing that intelligence, skills and talent can be developed in people. It is also key that people are brought out of their comfort and fear zones such that they start working in the growth zone comfortably. Leaders need to acknowledge not only success but also the efforts in cases where in spite of best efforts the teams did not achieve the desired results. This shall go a long way in motivating the team. The author also reinforces the need to respect diversity in team members in terms of intelligence and skill sets. Comparisons can be disastrous in terms of morale of teams. The last chapter focuses on the journey behind developing the future academic leaders. It is important not to undermine the importance of soft skills in future academic leaders. Academic leadership training programs need to focus on developing important skills such as decision making, critical thinking, consensus building etc. Leaders ought to be great communicators in order to convey their expectations, motivate people and transform organizations in the long run. The hallmark of a thriving organization is to work towards having a sustainable, efficient and accountable organization. This book is a must for all aspiring academic leaders and also those who are in chairs at the moment as it acquaints you and prepares you for the challenges of globalization, internationalization, polarization, climate change, crisis periods such as the global pandemic in order to turn them into opportunities to learn. The work is well researched looking at the examples and references from different disciplines. The only pinch felt by the reader is the font size of the print which definitely needed to be larger to read it comfortably.